

7-1-2006

Beyond Lore: A Call for Tutor Research

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Both as an undergraduate and graduate student tutor, I have found myself attracted to research of my own tutoring practice. This research has allowed me to explore the inner workings of conferences, to ask why one session clicks while another undoubtedly flops, and to become more flexible in my practice. For me, the research process has become more complicated through the years, as I have audiotaped tutorials, involved writers as participants, and begun to share my findings with others. The more I have immersed myself in qualitative research, the more I have come to believe that tutors must share their insights more widely and systematically with writing center audiences. For what I see missing from current discussions of practice is a sense that tutors are the agents, investigators, and researchers who know best what happens within tutorials.

Why should tutors become researchers?

Too often tutors are cast as the subjects, rather than the agents, of research. Two examples include the 1993 NWCA Scholarship Award Winners “‘Whispers of Coming and Going’: Lessons from Fannie” by Anne DiPardo and “The Politics of Tutoring: Feminism within the Patriarchy” by Meg Woolbright. In both case studies, which are often cited and read in tutor training courses, the researchers are outside observers who take critical stances toward the tutors they observe. DiPardo and Woolbright investigate tutorial dynamics without asking tutors to participate as coresearchers or to share their perspectives on what happened or what could be improved. These anthologized



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studies neglect the tutors' points of view and reinforce the practitioner-scholar divide.

In contrast, when tutors serve as researchers of our own practice, we promote agency and professionalism in tutoring work. Just as teachers have become researchers in their classrooms, tutors can conduct and share research of our writing conferences. Tutors, who are most intimately situated in writing conferences, should help depict and interpret tutoring practice.

What is tutor research?

In the course of working in and learning about writing centers, tutors do many types of research: from surveying writers to conducting literature reviews to assessing institutional policies. Oftentimes, tutors conduct informal research as we carry on conversations about our practices and reflect with other staff members on how we might improve tutorials. Both formal and informal research make valuable contributions to the everyday workings of writing centers. I propose, however, that we focus on a particular type of contribution that moves tutors beyond “researchers” into positions as “tutor researchers.”

While research itself is a broad term, “tutor research,” as a parallel to “teacher research” or “action research,” requires tutors to investigate our practice for the purpose of improvement. Tutor research allows us to better understand ourselves, our situations, and our teaching through qualitative data collection. Like classroom-based inquiry, tutor research is ethnographic, hypothesis-generative, inductive, contextualized, and naturalistic. It moves us beyond *lore* (stories about our tutoring experience) to investigated and analyzed practice. Furthermore, tutor research helps achieve the following aims:

- to overcome dichotomies of theory and research, student and teacher, teacher and scholar, and practitioner and researcher, among others;
- to blur the roles of student, teacher, researcher, writer, peer, and friend;
- to credit tutors for our contributions to writing center knowledge;
- to document phenomenon at the local level and, therefore, benefit one's local writing center, department, institution, or community;
- to create immediate outcomes for participants—both tutors and writers—and
- to generate new research questions.

These aims indicate the layered benefits of tutor research, as it creates both local and broader knowledge that can be applied within immediate tutorial contexts and explored throughout writing center communities.

How can tutors collect and analyze data?

To investigate writing center practice, tutors might use a variety of methodological approaches, although qualitative, ethnographic methods provide the most descriptive data. The following list provides an overview of methods that could be adopted from teacher research studies:

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Participant observation | Scripted or unscripted interviews |
| Field notes or tutor logs | Observations by others |
| Photographs of tutoring spaces | Letters from participants |
| Writing samples from tutorials | Transcript analysis |
| Video or audiotaping | Discourse analysis |

Table 1. Methods of data collection.

Data analysis occurs cyclically throughout the process of data collection, but at some point during the research, it helps to step back and systematically review the findings. Analyzing data might involve the review of transcripts, interviews, and observations to determine patterns. For example, for my thesis research, I looked closely at three variables (environment, relationships, and sense of community) that seemed to account for differences I noticed among tutorials. For each of these variables, I identified a number of categories and then coded my data for these patterns. Identifying recurrent themes allowed me to understand characteristics of my own tutoring and to pose new questions about how those characteristics influence effectiveness.

To ensure the validity and credibility of results, data analysis should draw on the tool of “triangulation,” which guarantees at least three points of intersection in methodology and practice. Tutors can achieve triangulation by collecting three types of data, asking three people to participate in analysis, or drawing on three theoretical lenses or disciplines. Triangulation might be explained by the maxim “the more, the better”: that is, the more ways of investigating or interpreting the same questions and data, the greater the validity of the findings. The key is to look at the same sources in different ways or by different observers to ensure reliability.

Certainly, tutor research can be time and labor intensive, especially when it involves hours of transcription or interviewing. To make research count toward professional or academic goals, tutors might consider ways to collect, analyze, and present data for course credit, as independent studies, for theses or dissertations, or as part of paid hours in the writing center.

What ethical concerns might tutors encounter?

As tutors examine ongoing practice in one-on-one or group tutorials, we need to think about the impact of our studies on participants: writers and staff members. We might work in small research teams, with writing center directors or staff, with professors who study methodology, or in consultation with our schools’ Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) to discuss and deal with ethical concerns that arise throughout the process. Because meaning-making requires interpretation, tutors will need to consider our positioning, subjectivities, and representations throughout data collection, analysis, and presentation. The following list presents some ethical considerations:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Representation | Anonymity and the use of pseudonyms |
| Self-critique and reflection | Confidentiality versus recognition |
| Subjectivities and interpretation | Informed consent |
| Pronoun use (I, we, us, them) | Risks and Benefit |
| Reciprocity and cooperation | Loyalties and mixed allegiances |
| Participant checks and verification | Betrayal through hidden intent |
| Observing versus evaluating | “Bad news” in reporting |
| Silencing and othering | Ownership of knowledge and texts |
| Insider versus outsider perspectives | Tone, form, and genre of write-up |
| Reliability and validity of findings | Participant expectations |
| IRB approval | Constraints of time and resources |

Table 2. Inventory of ethical considerations. Directors might support tutor research by holding staff meetings or class sessions devoted to any number of these considerations. Similarly, tutors can discuss, raise questions, and work through ethical concerns with participants.

Where can tutors publish research?

Tutor research is often shared at the local level through course presentations or staff meetings. However, to understand more fully what happens within the tutorial space—and for tutors to be accepted more fully as teacher-scholars—tutor research should be communicated within larger professional communities. Increasingly, writing center publications, including *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, *The Dangling Modifier*, and *Praxis*, encourage tutors to submit articles. More specifically, *Southern Discourse* has initiated a new column devoted to tutor research, and this publishing venue presents an excellent opportunity to share both discussions of methodology and findings. I invite tutors to continue researching and to move beyond lore to investigated, analyzed practice.

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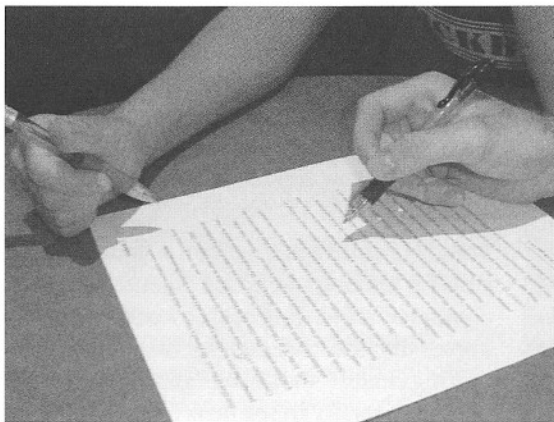


Photo courtesy of Elizabeth Carroll

strongly agreed (89.9%) or agreed (11.1%) that the instructors were well-prepared, knowledgeable, and offered assistance readily. All agreed that the handouts enhanced the in-class lectures, and that even though the course was difficult, they were glad they had taken it.

Teaching these courses led to the writing of this column.

This is the first time we have collaborated on a piece of writing. Previously Martin had papers to which I responded in conferences, and he has done the same with papers I have written for publication, including the last column of "Compass Points." This time we worked differently; we bounced ideas around verbally for quite a while, then we each wrote in the same document to discover where we wanted to go with the column. We sent newer drafts back and forth by email each day, then met at the end of the day to read aloud what we had written on the 20" monitor until we discovered what we really wanted to write. We even made a linear map that resembled a computer program. Now we are fine-tuning, questioning specific words, and adding or deleting ideas—what Martin calls "murdering our document."

The important point is that students in any discipline may use the writing center in ways they can't imagine. Whether it is to help students improve their writing, thinking and learning or to conduct authentic research in any discipline and share what they have learned; the writing center is a valid place to collaborate. While Martin and Michael were learning about teaching, something they would continue to reflect upon later, I was actually a student in their second XHTML course. I was not a star, but Martin tutored me one-to-one. He exemplified the qualities of patience and clear tutor response while working with an anxious, overly impatient student. He had developed skills beyond what I could have taught him about tutoring. By reversing our roles, we both learned. ✨

"Beyond Lore" continued from page 4

Where can I learn more about tutor research?

Writing center research

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